
“Transcending the World” in World Literature

The Upanishads

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Introduction

In the context of Indian classical literature, the Upanishads (Upaniṣads) hold a particularly important place for both those within the Hindu tradition and for scholars of early Indian religious history and literature. For many Hindus, the Upanishads are viewed as the intellectual culmination of the Vedic sacrificial tradition that preceded them and become known as *vedānta* (lit. “end of the Veda”), texts that serve as root texts for some of the classical Indian philosophical schools (*darśhana* [*darśana*]) that developed several centuries later. From a historical perspective, the Upanishads mark a shift away from the ritual tradition of the Vedas when newly developed notions of *karma*, asceticism, mental training or *yoga*, and *mokṣa* (*mokṣa*, “liberation”) begin to coexist and then – along with devotional (*bhakti*) trends – supplant the previously dominant sacrificial worldview. While many Hindus see a fundamental continuity in Vedic and Upanishadic thinking, religious and literary historians tend to see the Upanishads as having greater affinity with later Hinduism than with the earlier elite and technical ritual milieu. But even if we assume the position of the latter, it should always be remembered that the composers of the earliest Upanishads were of the same priestly families enacting and producing the Vedas; they assume its framework and validity. Along with an ideological shift, the emergence of the Upanishads also marks a

significant material shift, reflecting the settling of formerly nomadic peoples in towns and cities along the Gangetic plain, where changes in material conditions can be seen in the texts themselves.

In the context of “world literature,” however, the Upanishads might – at least initially – seem to be something of an uncomfortable fit. Setting aside the fact that such designations often carry preconceived notions of ethnic origin and/or modern understandings of the nation-state, the Upanishads as literature – both individually and collectively as a genre – are an amalgam rather than a unity. This is not to say that there are not certain stylistic, linguistic, and especially thematic continuities across the Upanishads which give the broader contours of a genre. There are, as I will discuss below. But it is to say that there is no single style, character, author, theme, or narrative that any single text, let alone the genre, adheres to. Rather it is a series of overlapping concerns about the nature of the cosmos, the role of the human being both within and beyond that cosmos (i.e. transcendence or liberation), and especially various conceptual strategies through which to explore these concerns that can be seen as loosely constituting a genre. If we take “world literature” as primarily designating a type of literary production that is both novel in form and content and enduring in impact and importance (whether literary, social, or religious), then the Upanishads most certainly qualify as one of the most significant contributions from the ancient subcontinent.

Origins

The Upanishads originate out of the same ritual lineages as the Vedas, four genres of ritual texts that are each the domain of particular families devoted to their preservation and performance. These four genres (Rigveda [Ṛgveda], Samaveda [Sāmaveda], Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda; c. 15th–9th centuries BCE) parallel four priestly roles within the sacrifice, roles which place ultimate importance on the fidelity of recitation and on the associated ritual actions in making offerings to the gods. This orthoprax approach is premised on proper ritual activity producing the proper outcome. At the center of that orthopraxy is speech (*vāc*) and fire (*agni*), the two mediums which permit communication between the human and the divine. As the *āryan* (“noble”) people were obligated to praise and feed the gods through ritual offerings into fire, so the gods were obligated to reward such hospitality. The priesthood, then, is a ritual technocracy that facilitates this transaction to the mutual benefit of all parties, especially of the *yajamāna*, the sponsor of the sacrifice. Each of the four priest types, along with numerous subtypes, are tasked with these complicated procedures to procure wealth, long life, children, and prosperity for the clan as well as general prosperity for the cosmos as a whole.

It is from these hieratic families that speculations on the deeper meaning of the sacrifice, the nature of the individuals involved in its performance, and the nature of the human being within the cosmos more broadly develop into secondary literary productions. The Brahmanas (Brāhmaṇas) which follow the four Vedas historically, for example, generally can be characterized as commentaries and principally are concerned with esoteric cosmological explanations of the practical aspects of a sacrifice (i.e. why an offering is made in a certain fashion or why a particular recitation is cosmologically appropriate in a particular

context), while the Aranyakas (Āraṇyakas) concern themselves with secret and especially powerful formulas to be used outside inhabited areas (hence, “wilderness books”). The Upanishads find their origins in these two genres – in fact, the earliest Upanishad (the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad [Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad]) is simultaneously called an Aranyaka and Upanishad, while being the concluding section of the Shatapatha Brahmana (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa). Other early Upanishads also blur such genre distinctions (e.g. Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana [Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa]). In this fashion, the fluidity of genre here is part of its organic development out of the ritual arena.

The Term

The term Upanishad comes to designate those texts which are more philosophically and cosmologically oriented and less strictly tied to the practice of ritual, suggesting a shift from the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, though not a hard break. Traditionally, the term Upanishad has been interpreted to mean a “sitting down” (upa + ni + √sad) of a student next to a teacher, emphasizing the special relationship of transmission in the context of esoteric teachings. More likely, however, the term originally refers to the content, rather than the form of transmission. When the term Upanishad is used within the texts themselves it appears to mean a “sitting down” of one idea or concept next to another in a hierarchical relationship to tease out the subtle and elaborate connections (*bandhu*) between the two (based on phonetics, appearance, mythic association, or other criteria). When designating a genre, the term marks a class of texts dominated by such connections (see Falk 1986 and Thieme 1968). While the Brahmanas can be said to be concerned with esoteric explanations of the practices of ritual, the Upanishads extend such Brahmana-style explanations to the sense organs, cognition, the process of death (including redeath and rebirth), and the potentiality of escaping the cycle of existence.

Form

There are 13 to 15 *mukhya* (“principal”) Upanishads, older Upanishads (c. 7th–2nd century BCE) that are more intimately connected to their respective Vedic *śākhās* (“branches”).

Mukhya Upanishads

- Brihadaranyaka (Bṛhadāraṇyaka)
- Chandyaoga (Chāndogya)
- Kaushitaki (Kauṣītaki)
- Aitareya
- Taittiriya (Taittirīya)
- Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana (Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa)
- Kena
- Katha (Kāṭha)
- Isha (Īśā)
- Shvetashvatara (Svetāśvatara)
- Mundaka (Muṇḍaka)

Prashna (Prašna)
 Mandukya (Māṇḍūkya)
 Maitreyi (Maitrāyaṇīya)
 Mahanarayana (Mahānārāyaṇa)

Neither the Upanishads nor the Vedas before them form a closed canon like one finds in other religious communities. The ancient sages (*ṛṣi*) heard the nature of the cosmos and that nature was the content of the Vedas, the sound of sacrifice. This event was neither singular, historically fixed, nor closed. In theory, Vedic texts could have continued to be composed up until the present day. In practice, though, literary productions of early Vedic genres come to an end when the practical need for new compositions in each genre ceases (roughly in the traditional ordering, where the Rīgveda is the oldest and the Atharvaveda, the youngest, though there is significant internal variation). In this way, “text as enacted” is a significant constraining factor on their literary production. The Upanishads, while containing ideas that germinated in this same praxis, are not constrained by the actual performance of the ritual; as the genre develops, so the ideas can spread outside of the ritual arena and Upanishadic composition continues up until the medieval period, long after Vedic sacrifice became a small minority tradition (these later, non-classical Upanishads tend to be sectarian in nature and cannot claim broader authoritative status based on age or clear connection to the Veda). In the north, there are said to be a total of 52 Upanishads; in the south, 108 (known as the *muktikā* canon from the text in which the list appears). Retellings of certain Upanishadic stories also appear in the epic *Mahabharata* (*Mahābhārata*), the Puranas (Purāṇas), and also modern comic books and other media (see, for example, Lindquist forthcoming).

The texts themselves contain several text-types which may be variously philosophical, ritualistic, or esoteric in nature. Generally speaking, the literary form of the corpus is three-fold: the earliest Upanishads are in prose, reflecting their origin in the prose Brahmanas; the second layer of Upanishadic texts are in verse, perhaps an intentional attempt to archaize and claim a status akin to the Vedas proper; the final third layer reverts back primarily to prose. While this is broadly true, verse citation within prose is common and shows different influences, several of which suggest unknown literary or folk sources. Where verse is used, it is often to claim precedent or add significant abstract, metaphysical, or aesthetic qualities to the discussion at hand.

For example, Brihadaranyaka chapter 3 is an elaborate debate between a priest, Yajnavalkya (Yājñavalkya), and a series of competitors at the court of King Janaka. The content of the debate starts with describing the roles of each priest in a sacrifice and their esoteric correlates and then progressively extends, in both abstraction and in narrative tension, through the successive dialogues between characters. The story culminates in a complex discussion about the nature of death and immortality, paralleling the eventual death of Yajnavalkya’s chief rival, Shakalya (Śākalya), by a “shattered head” as narrative proof that he did not truly understand immortality (Lindquist 2011). But lest the discussion itself seem closed, this narrative is further capped (Brihadaranyaka 3.9.28) by a riddle poem about the possibility of rebirth (*samsāra*).

Man is like a mighty tree –
 that’s the truth.

His body hairs are its leaves,
His skin is its outer bark.
Blood flows from his skin,
As sap from the bark of a tree.
Blood flows when the skin is pricked,
As sap, when the bark is slit.

His flesh is the sapwood;
His sinews are the fibers –
 that's certain.
His bones are the heartwood;
And his marrow resembles the pith.

A tree when it's cut down,
Grows anew from its root;
From what root does a mortal man grow,
When he is cut down by death?

Do not say, "From the seed";
For it's produced from him
 while he is still alive;
And like a tree
 sprouting from a seed,
It takes birth at once,
 even before he dies.

A tree, when it's uprooted,
Will not sprout out again;
From what root does a mortal man grow,
When he is cut down by death?

Once he's born,
 he can't be born again.
Who, I ask,
 will beget him again?

Perception, bliss, *brahman*,
The gift of those who give,
The highest good –
 awaits those who know this
 and stand firm.

(trans. Olivelle 1998)

This poem consists of a detailed exploration of the metaphor between a tree and a human, particularly whether a human's death is like being cut down or whether it is like being uprooted. It contains several word-plays, utilizing different forms of the verb "to be born"

(*√jan*). The term “metaphor” is insufficient in English, because underlying this poem is the suggestion of a *literal* parallel between a tree and a human, albeit at a subtle or abstract level. And if a tree and a human being are *fundamentally* alike, is the death of a person the same as being cut down or uprooted? What the author(s) intended as an answer has been debated (Horsch 1966), though the likely compositional history suggests an answer in the affirmative: a person’s death is like being cut down and a person will be reborn like a tree from a root (Lindquist 2004). Whatever the answer, true knowledge about the fate of a person after death brings great reward – “the highest good” – for the person who knows. The riddle poem prevents any easy narrative closure to the debate, an example of how inquiry into complex issues can lead to further inquiries.

Narrative

As sacred texts, the Upanishads themselves are not subject to literary criticism within the Indian tradition. This, of course, does not mean that they do not convey various aesthetic and literary qualities, especially within the numerous narratives or verse passages, but rather that *rasa* (emotional “flavor,” the principal consideration in Indian literary criticism) is not a formal aim. Such literary criticism violates the understanding that the Upanishads, like the Vedas, become seen as *apauruṣeya* (“not of human origin”). The Upanishads are principally seen as conduits of great wisdom (*jñāna*), particularly wisdom which transcends such mundane considerations as literariness.

This said, however, the Upanishads contain several narratives that are central to the texts in which they appear, but especially important for the spread of Upanishadic ideas outside of scholastic circles proper. Many of the narratives are dialogues – particularly between teachers and students, though sometimes between rivals, co-ritualists, or family members – where the dialogic partner (who parallels the audience of the text) is led through abstract and often progressively difficult ideas. These narratives are often humorous, down-to-earth, fantastical, or even tense and dangerous.

The stories in the Upanishads are often “true-to-life” if not “true-in-life,” meaning that there is a significant shift toward realism in the narratives found in the Upanishads compared to the abundance of the clearly mythological found in earlier texts. This seems, at least partially, because of their origins within hieratic circles and the priests’ self-reflectivity on the deeper meanings of their own practices. It is also self-reflective in a broader sense: a larger theme at the center of the Upanishads is the nature of existence – especially of the place and role of a human being within phenomenal existence – and this is particularly a *human* problem. While their reality and importance is generally not denied, gods play very little role in Upanishadic discussions or stories.

Characters within the stories are numerous, but they are overwhelmingly Brahmin males (i.e. reflective of the composers and general audience). There are significant exceptions to this; as secondary characters, kings, women, men of unknown caste, and even talking fires and animals play important roles, filling out particular themes in individual narratives (Lindquist 2018).

Thinking With and Through the Upanishads

While it has been rather common for both Hindus and scholars to refer to philosophy within the Upanishads, either in the singular or in the plural, it is important to note that this does not mean that the texts can be characterized as systematic philosophy. Properly speaking, it is later philosophical schools known as *darśhanas* (“viewpoints” or “perspectives”) that follow systematic rules of inquiry and utilize texts such as the Upanishads as root-texts from which to comment and claim authority. Historically it is better, I contend, to think of the composers of the Upanishads as concerned with a thematically related series of philosophical concerns that they explore through a number of literary forms (exposition, narrative, and verse) and strategies. In this sense, the *processes* of thinking about complex and obscure questions is what is emphasized in the texts and less the conclusions. The Upanishads do not offer a single solution, creation myth, or ontology to the questions of life, death, and liberation, but they do offer a number of ways to conceive of possible answers.

Part of this lack of single answers and systematicity is practical and due to the compositional history of the texts: many Upanishads, like the Vedas that precede them, are composite oral texts of several authors spanning several centuries. But part of this lack of single answers is also premised on the notion that “true knowing” (*sa evaṃ veda*, “he who knows in this way,” a reoccurring theme in the Upanishads) surpasses any mundane literary or mental capacities. In one sense, any singular explanation or telling may offer a partial or contingent answer, but it is not necessarily exclusive or complete in itself.

Themes

Ātman and Brahman

Perhaps the most prominent topic of discussion in the Upanishads is the nature of the *ātman*, the underlying principle of a human being, commonly translated as “Self.” The *ātman* is often, though not always, discussed in parallel with *brahman*, a cosmological foundation which undergirds all that exists. Each of these is generally conceived of as the basis of existence of the individual and the cosmos, respectively, but each is also separate and apart from that existence. Their relationship to each other is discussed in great technical detail by later philosophical schools which will not be discussed here, but include positions which discuss the relationship of *ātman* and *brahman* such as one of absolute sameness (that is, non-dualism or *advaita*), of qualified sameness (*viśiṣṭa advaita*), or of separateness (dualism or *dvaita*).

While the term *ātman* can be a reflexive pronoun or a term meaning the physical human body, in the Upanishads it is often discussed as an elusive foundation, a substrate only discernable to the wise. In one famous passage (Bṛihadarayanaka 3.7.1–23), the *ātman* is described as the “inner controller” (*antaryāmin*), the principle which lies behind not only the senses and cognition, but behind all of existence. Because of this “inner controller,” a human being has the capacity to see, hear, smell, etc., but as a substrate with an independent existence, the *ātman* can’t itself be seen or heard or smelt. The *ātman* lacks any individualizing characteristics, as those are necessarily derivative or secondary. While meditative

or ascetic influences are lacking or nascent in the earliest Upanishads, they rise to dominance and become especially important in the minor Upanishads after yoga has risen to prominence in the Hindu tradition.

The Mundaka Upanishad, for example, suggests retreating from the world altogether, including from the world of sacrifice. This retreat separates the person from worldly obligation and desires, so that the ascetic can focus on attaining the *ātman*.

But those in the wilderness, calm and wise,
 who live a life of penance and faith,
 as they beg their food;
 Through the sun's door they go, spotless,
 to where that immortal Person is
 that immutable self
 (1.2.11; trans. Olivelle 1998)

Life, Death, and Redearth

As least as far as the Vedic texts are concerned, the goals of the sacrifice were geared almost solely toward this world, particularly the enjoyment of a long life, wealth, and children. Given that nomadic life is inherently precarious, both in competition for resources with other clans and in the vicissitudes of nature, it is not surprising that the religious worldview was aimed at overcoming such difficulties. The Vedas do not focus on the after-life, but concern themselves with how to make this life flourish. The Upanishads, not geared toward the outcomes of ritual practice, are often critical of life in the world and its inherent instability. While material conditions are only one factor in the history of ideas, there must be a parallel between newly developing Upanishadic ideas and the social and material realities of an urbanizing environment: the breakdown of traditional family structures, increasing wealth inequality, disease, and a host of other difficulties that come with fast-increasing populations. While the early Upanishads do not deny or criticize ritual practice directly, they often criticize wealth and desire and are concerned with the ultimate nature of existence as opposed to its contingent expressions. The Upanishads explicitly discuss the nature of death, both concretely and abstractly, as well as what may continue to persist after death and whether there is a way out of *samsāra*, the cycle of existence and re-existence.

Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism all hold that a person is reborn based on his or her actions in current and previous lives, though how this occurs and its philosophical underpinnings vary widely between and within each tradition. Rebirth, however, is not present in early Vedic thinking, but emerges in the Upanishadic context – at roughly the same time as Jainism and Buddhism – as redeath (*punararmṛtyu*), where any satisfactions met in this or future lives are viewed as ultimately transitory and insufficient. Death, then, is not explored in the Upanishads as a singular negative experience, but as an inevitable experience that must be repeated ad infinitum.

The Katha Upanishad contains a discussion between a boy, Naciketas, and the God of Death, Yama (1-2.18). Naciketas compels Yama to tell him about the nature of death and Yama tries to distract him by offering him a long life, children, fame, and “all those desires

hard to obtain in this mortal world" (1.25). Naciketas is not swayed and Yama praises him for his wisdom, stating that it is such desires that lead to repeated death.

This transit lies hidden from a careless fool,
 who is deluded by the delusion of wealth.
 Thinking "This is the world, there is no other,"
 he falls into my power again and again
 (2.6; trans. Olivelle 1998)

It is in this context that *karma* ("action") is first discussed in the Hindu tradition, particularly in relation to the outcomes it produces. The first mention of *karma* which suggests a system of action and retributive consequence is Brihadarayanaka 3.2.18 where, "A man turns into something good by good action, and into something bad by bad action." This cycle repeats through countless lives unless an escape route can be found.

Liberation

That escape route in the Upanishads is most often referred to as *moksha*, literally "freedom," broadly here meaning freedom from the vicissitudes of existence and re-existence, an escape not only from the lived world, but also from the hells and heavens that might intervene before an eventual rebirth. Other times, liberation is discussed as *abhaya* ("non-fear"), "attaining the world of *brahman*," or the more practical "averting repeated death."

True knowledge is what is said to transform an individual and this entails a fundamental reorientation in a person's understanding of his or her relation to the world. While it is perhaps easy enough to understand how an individual's understanding of the world alters how he or she sees and interacts in the world, the Upanishadic claim is much stronger: not only is the individual changed, but so also is the world. If *ātman* and *brahman* are substrates upon which the individual and the cosmos exist, truly understanding the substrate modifies *everything* that is dependent upon it. In this way, liberation is not solely an "experience," but is perhaps better thought of as a "modification of being." So while it may seem contradictory that a liberated person "finds wealth" (Brihadarayanaka 4.4.24) or "fame" (Brihadarayanaka 6.4.28) among other worldly-sounding goals, it must be remembered that wealth and fame are but a part of a whole complicated web of interrelationships which, for the liberated person, is also transformed. Thought of in this way, it is perhaps easier to conceive of how such true understanding might bring all that the world has to offer, but also intervene in the accumulation of *karma* and thus bring *saṃsāra* to an end.

Conceptual Strategies

If the cosmos consists of myriad interrelated objects, concepts, processes, sounds, and forms, then the ways to explore those interrelationships are also myriad. Broadly speaking, however, the Upanishads employ five rhetorical strategies as conceptual maps by which to understand those relations. Such mapping may take the form of one-to-one equations, extended chains of relationships, or complex webs, where perceived straight lines lead in several directions and reconnect in different fashions. Brereton (1990) and Lindquist (2016)

have elaborated these general strategies elsewhere, so only a summary is necessary here. The five primary strategies are: (1) correlation; (2) emergence and resolution; (3) hierarchy; (4) paradox; and (5) cycles.

Each of these strategies creates a means by which to understand a relationship between one object or concept and another. Correlation is the most straightforward, where an aspect of one is paralleled to another. Sometimes the Upanishads explain what the criteria are in drawing such relations or they are relatively obvious (i.e. religious etymologies based on the sound or appearance); other times they are obscure or hidden, perhaps elaborated by the teacher to the student outside of the text itself. Brihadaranyaka 1.1.1, for example, parallels the parts of a horse being sacrificed to all of creation.

The head of the sacrificial horse, clearly, is the dawn – its sight is the sun; its breath is the wind; and its gaping mouth is the fire common to all men. The body (*ātman*) of the sacrificial horse is the year – its back is the sky; its abdomen is the intermediate region; its underbelly is the earth; its flanks are the quarters; its ribs are the intermediate quarters, its limbs are the seasons ... (trans. Olivelle 1998)

Emergence and resolution, on the one hand, is another strategy where the emphasis is on process and movement – how something extends and expands outward and then retracts and recedes inward. Such a strategy may explain how a multitude (such as sense organs or cosmological bodies) is created out of a singularity (such as *ātman* or *brahman*) and returns back to it or how an individual human being is born and then dies. Hierarchy, on the other hand, posits higher and lower levels of relation much like a ladder, especially as a means to explore pinnacles or foundations.

Another famous story (Chandogya 6.12) culminates in just such a ladder when a teacher tells his student to cut open a fruit and asks him what he finds.

“Bring a banyan fruit.”

“Here it is, sir.”

“Cut it up.”

“I’ve cut it up, sir.”

“What do you see there?”

“These quite tiny seeds, sir.”

“Now, take one of them and cut it up.”

“I’ve cut one up, sir.”

“What do you see there?”

“Nothing, sir.”

Then he [Uddalaka] told him: “This finest essence here, son, that you can’t even see – look how on account of that finest essence this huge banyan tree stands here.

“Believe, my son: the finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how you are, Śvetaketu.” (6.12.1–2; trans. Olivelle 1998)

Paradox is another rhetorical strategy and, while not as common as the others, points to logic being insufficient to comprehend that which lies outside of common perception or

even outside of the phenomenal world altogether. The purpose of such a strategy is to dissolve apparent contradictions to see an underlying reality beyond. Cycles focus on circularity, whether of the sacrifices, the seasons, or of the individual human being from life to life.

These strategies are different means by which to think about how one thing or concept may be related to another, whether by pinpointing or charting a course on a conceptual map, climbing up or down a hierarchy, reconciling perceived oppositions, or circling around where the beginning and end are the same. None posits itself as absolute or complete, but rather they are different means to explore and understand a hierarchical and interconnected cosmos, where the web of connections can be multiplied by the ingenuity of the composer of the text.

Translation and Trajectories

While knowledge of Vedic texts was originally restricted to those priestly families entrusted with their preservation and performance, the Upanishads appear to break new ground, at least rhetorically, with broader audiences. Though the knowledge that the Upanishads contain is repeatedly referred to as "secret" and the transmission of that knowledge is said to be limited to especially worthy students, notably sons, the Upanishads also suggest other potential audiences: kings, women, and even members of social groups that might otherwise have been excluded. We also encounter new "teaching contexts" in the texts, such as the court of King Janaka, indicating that courtly patronage and learning also must have played a role. Indeed, the "secrecy" that the Upanishads claim for themselves was more likely a claim about their importance in the competitive marketplace of an urban environment rather than an indication of rigid restrictions. That many Upanishadic ideas and stories are later repeated and recomposed in the epics and Puranas suggests that their "secrets" were not as tightly guarded as they purport and that the texts produced new literary trajectories and audiences, albeit still within Sanskrit-knowing circles.

Given the role of rulers as both patrons and students within the Upanishads, it is not entirely surprising to find that they even reached the Moghul court, albeit in a limited fashion. During the time of Akbar the Great (1542–1605) – a ruler known for a broad interest in different religions – the short *Allopanishad* (*Allopanīṣad*) is thought to have been composed, a text that combines (rather basic) Upanishadic ideas with praise for Allah (Cohen 2018). Akbar's great-grandson, Dara Shikoh (1615–1659), was also responsible for translating several Hindu religious texts into Persian, including 50 Upanishads under the title *Sirr-e-Akbar* (The great secret). What sort of influence his translation may have had during his time is unclear, but Dara Shikoh found within these texts a monotheism that coincided with his view of Islam and which affirmed his own universalist tendencies. It is his text that the Frenchman A.H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) encountered and subsequently translated into French and Latin; and it is Duperron's Latin text that first intrigued the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, and influenced his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea*).

On the subcontinent, the first translation into English was by Rammohun Roy, a Bengali Brahmin employed by the British, who felt that all Hindus should have access to ancient sacred texts regardless of language or lineage (Killingley 2018). Like Schopenhauer, Roy also had his own religious leanings which he sought to propagate through the texts, particularly a vision of Hinduism as monotheistic, devoid of “superstition” and idolatry, and on par with Christianity and Islam. His emphasis on the Upanishads as a foundational set of texts for the tradition (over and above the four Vedas) and his creation of the *Brahmo Samaj*, an organization centered around his ideas, influenced many others, notably Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda is credited with being one of the first Hindu leaders to propagate *yoga* in the West, though it is equally notable that he emphasized the Upanishads as the great textual source of Hinduism’s past at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

The Upanishads also made their way into Western literary circles. W.B. Yeats translated the texts, for example, and authors such as T.S. Eliot drew direct inspiration from them, particularly in *The Waste Land*. Others influenced by these texts include such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Leo Tolstoy.

Several of these trajectories of interpretation and translation of the Upanishads have emphasized the philosophical, expository sections of the texts as they suited the intellectual needs of the particular individual in question and a smaller number have utilized the narratives. It is important, though, to emphasize that the narratives also spread outward on the subcontinent as well, albeit in more convoluted fashion and with less easily drawn lines: into epics and other religious literature, such as the Puranas; into various venues of formal and informal forms of religious education; into the intimacy of the home, such as between parent and child; and much later into modern media such as comic books and animated shorts.

Conclusion

The Upanishads have endured throughout the history of Hinduism first and foremost because they continue to speak to people within a larger religious framework about the nature of existence and especially about the position of the human being within the cosmos. These texts are both an anchor into the hoary past of the sages (ṛṣi), but also a philosophical launching point whose breadth of concerns have spoken to generations up to the modern period. While they begin within the families of Vedic practice, they spread out into formal scholastic philosophical traditions, more popular epic and other religious storytelling, and into a broader Hindu religious consciousness. Whether in the numerous translations into all major Indic languages and most European ones; whether in recompositions of old stories or in serving as the philosophical basis for discussions in the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Bhagavad-gītā*), or various Puranas; whether in scholastic *darśhanas* or in medieval ascetic communities; or whether in modern comic books geared at a novel form for retelling ancient stories to a modern generation – the Upanishads are an enduring and living literature for many in the Hindu tradition, especially for conceptualizing the place of the human being within phenomenal existence and for actualizing a path out of it.

SEE ALSO: The Invisible World of the Rigveda; Mahabharata

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